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AUTHOR Lewes, Ulle Erika
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ABSTRACT

Peer evaluation was implemented in a college composition seminar to explore its effectiveness. The class of 13 students met once a week, workshop style, for 4 hours. Students wrote short papers (three to five typed pages) every week in an assigned mode (critical analysis, social commentary, familiar essay) but on topics of their own choosing. For the first assignment, students and the instructor responded by editing all the essays line by line. The next step was primary trait scoring. Other evaluation methods used included the nonjudgmental description of the essay suggested by Peter Elbow, analytical scoring moving from problems with the essay as a whole down to grammar and mechanics and even transactional analysis. The class discussed audience expectations, genre, and levels of style. Such discussions, outside as well as in class, led to thoughtful revisions. The writing of all the students improved, due to total immersion in the writing process and increased audience awareness. Course evaluations indicated that students also perceived an improvement in their own writing. Editing became more incisive and reliable as well. At the end of the term students graded all their peers on the quality of both their editing and their writing. The students' evaluations did not differ from those of the instructor. Despite the work load, students spoke quite fervently about the value of the course, indicating that peer evaluation can be a very effective teaching tool. (HTH)

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Ulle Erika Lewes
Department of English
Ohio Wesleyan University
Delaware, Ohio 43015

ED226355

# PEER-EVALUATION IN A WRITING SEMINAR

Most students view teachers' comments on papers as a form of punishment and as a way for teachers to justify the grades they give. They tend to take this view not only with teachers who correct only surface errors (sprinkling "agr" and "cs" and other hieroglyphics over the margins), but even with those teachers who respond to student essays in a more complex manner (describing, suggesting, questioning, reminding, and assigning, as recommended in Elaine O. Lees' useful article, "Evaluating Student Writing"[1]). They view peer comments quite differently. When the students' peers are going to hear, read, and talk about their essays, then an error becomes a social blunder -- and a word of admiration becomes the equivalent of a Nobel Prize! "Teaching by Peer Pressure" some might call it!

I have always incorporated a bit of peer evaluation into my writing courses, whether Freshman English, Research Writing, Intermediate Composition, or Advanced Composition. And I've done this for reasons more compelling than peer pressure. Already in 1968 James Moffett[2] recommended peer review because it encourages the growth of independence from the teacher. And Peter Elbow[3] proposed that peer readers should describe their experience of reading an essay, in order to help the writer remain the one who decides what to revise, and how, and why. More recently other theorists have argued in favor of peer-evaluation as a way of allowing students to work collaboratively and to move beyond revision as mere copy-editing.[4] Last year I decided to make peer evaluation the CENTRAL FEATURE of my "capstone" senior seminar for our

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writing majors in order to explore the effectiveness of the approach carefully.

The class of 13 students met once a week, workshop style, for four hours. Students wrote short (3-5 typed pages) papers every week in an assigned mode (critical analysis, book review, report on field work, social commentary, research paper, familiar essay, and so forth), but on topics of their own choosing. They produced two copies of each essay, numbered every fifth line of their texts for easy reference, and gave one copy to me while depositing the other at the reserve desk of the library. There was a separate folder in the library for every student, containing his or her weekly essay, as well as an ample supply of editing sheets modeled on those used by Frank O'Hare in his workshops on "creative revision."[5] Students responded to the papers of all their classmates before our next meeting; I also responded to the papers, and reviewed all the students' editing sheets as well, making suggestions to the ~~individual~~ editors in individual memos.

Naturally I carefully directed the students' experience in editing. Their first editing assignment required them to comment on each essay, virtually line by line -- remarking, positively and negatively, on whatever caught their attention -- and to conclude their commentary with two comprehensive suggestions. They discovered immediately that commenting on everything was exhausting for them as editors and, even worse, overwhelming for them as writers; how could an inexperienced writer, or indeed any writer, hope to respond to 13 sets of detailed comments in attempting the revision?

Thence it was easy to move to primary trait scoring, emphasizing a few features at a time, which would vary from week to week: sometimes paragraph organization, then succinctness, then perhaps tone of voice, and so on. Of course the students continued their line-by-line inspection, but learned to make their final comments effective summaries of the two major problems

detected. For example one such final comment read as follows: "Absence of transitional devices gives the impression of choppiness even though I think you do have a coherent plan in mind." This final comment summed up almost a dozen line-by-line comments about the need for transitions.

Other times I asked them to summarize and describe the essays in the non-judgmental way suggested by Peter Elbow. Then again, we would try our hand at analytical scoring, noting the categories of problems in terms of priorities, moving from problems with the essay as a whole, to problems at the paragraph level, to the sentence, to the word, and finally to matters of grammar, usage and mechanics.[6]

Although all editing was required to contain positive as well as negative criticism, one week we experimented with positive comments only: noting perhaps a section that worked nicely, a well-chosen word, a successful opening strategy, an effective use of analogy, and so on. Although the students were initially skeptical about the value of this particular approach, when they reviewed the editing sheets from their peers, they proclaimed that this had been an unexpectedly useful teaching device: they had not been aware of what they did well and how they could build on those strengths!

Later in the term we even used the transactional approach, which involves writers attaching questions about the effectiveness of their essays to which the editors should reply. Wendy Landus-Saltz presents a nice model for this approach in the Fall 1981 issue of The Writing Instructor.[7]

Obviously all this editorial scrutiny led to interesting and even heated discussions in class, especially when combined with readings from Lanham's Revising Prose, Williams' Style, Trimble's Writing With Style, as well as essays such as Linda Flower's much-cited "Writer Based Prose."[8]

The problems and issues the students encountered when they attempted to be constructive critics and editors showed them that responding to writing

is a complex activity. We talked about audience expectations and constraints on the author, about overt and disguised purposes, about decorum, about genres, about levels of style. We discussed what to deal with first (for example, why bother correcting the misspellings when the essay lacks focus?). We discussed the difference between a mistake and an error (it was enlightening for them to learn that a mistake is a slip; an error is a recurring mis-application or misunderstanding of a rule! I even put Mina Shaughnessy's book[9] on reserve for those who wished to explore this matter further). The four hours always went by swiftly - we sometimes forgot to take a break, and a few students always stayed after class, some talking with me, others talking just as earnestly amongst themselves.

Soon I learned that these discussions on writing and editing were also occuring in the library while the students worked on their weekly editing load. Often controversies that arose during these discussions were introduced during the next class meeting. In short, the class turned into a genuine writing workshop!

These activities inevitably led to thoughtful revisions. Although only two revisions were required, most students attempted four -- not bad for a ten-week term! It should be noted that these all involved substantive rewriting, not mere re-copying with a few cosmetic changes. The revisions involved deletions, substitutions, additions, and re-arrangements on the level of word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph, and occasionally even brand new starts. In short, the revisions conformed to Nancy Sommer's[10] criteria for revision as a continuous and integral part of the writing process.

I can state here that the writing of <u>all</u> students improved, often quite rapidly and dramatically. For example, they attempted more left-branching and embedding, and they eliminated a great deal of dead wood. I attribute

their improvement to two things: total immersion and increased audience-awareness. By "total immersion" I simply mean what I have already described: they were writing, editing, rewriting, discussing writing, thinking about writing and reading about writing all week long. The increased audience-awareness was due to the fact that they did not have to invent an imaginary audience. It may be true, as Walter Ong claims in his well known PMLA article, that in some sense "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction "[11] but at least my students had a known readership of 13 individuals for whom to produce their reader-based prose. They were providing context, explaining, clarifying, and adjusting tone and voice, instead of producing papers which were simply "memory dumps," as Linda Flower whimsically terms them in her new book, Problem Solving Strategies for Writers.[12]

From the detailed course evaluations I asked students to complete at the end of the term, I was delighted to learn that the students also perceived an improvement in their own writing. They suggested five reasons for this improvement: 1) They had learned to be aware of audience. 2) They had learned to detect recurring problems and to suggest solutions. 3) They had learned to transfer these skills to their own writing. 4) They had expanded their range of strategies by seeing how others tackled the same assignment. 5) And they had even learned to deal with inconsistent advice from their 13 critics.

At the same time that their writing improved, the editing of my students became much more incisive and reliable as well. Early on they learned to avoid vague comments like "unclear" and "awkward." Soon they learned to assign priorities for suggested revisions, instead of overwhelming the writers

with too many scattered criticisms.

At the end of the term I asked the students to grade all their peers, giving one grade for the quality of the editing, and the other for writing. When I averaged these with my own grades, I found that the students' evaluations did not differ from mine, except in two cases in which theirs were half a grade point lower.

They were asked to explain each grade with a comment of about 200 words. I was happy to note that besides commenting on organization, structure, grammar and mechanics, they also considered such rhetorical variables as speaker's stance, audience awareness, adjustments to suit purpose, and complexity of thought. For example, the following excerpts come from one student's final evaluation of a peer whose writing was error-free but thin. "C. has improved in her insights and she doesn't pretend to be capable of things she can't do. However her comprehension of tone, irony, nuance, etc. is shallow." But he goes on to note that her strength is correctness, and he praises her value as an editor in that realm: "Because she is such a good technician, she was very helpful in her editing, not only with problems in grammar, but also with transitions and organization." I find this a remarkably mature and accurate evaluation of student C.

Finally, although they all conceded that the work load was onerous, the students spoke quite fervently about the value of the course. Typical comments included: "This was the most demanding course I have taken at Ohio Wesleyan and also the best;" "The most enjoyable course I have ever taken;" "My writing has reached a new plateau;" and "I wish it weren't over." Perhaps the following quotation explains best what happened: "Because you stressed from the beginning that we are part of a camaraderie because we all <u>care</u> about writing, the students became very close -- all of us! -- and

talked often, informally, about writing. This latter aspect of the course was unique. I'm sure you set it up this way for that very purpose! It worked better than any of us might yet realize."

At this point let me forestall the thought that this approach could work only with a select group of already-competent writers. I have since used a similar approach in our freshman-level course on the research paper. The only difference I found was that freshmen needed shorter and more detailed editing assignments. Indeed, Irvin Peckham discloses that writing can be taught at the high school level with peer evaluation as the dominant teaching device.[13]

In closing let me say that I have also become an advocate of peer tutoring and peer conferencing in the past few years. I cannot, however, agree with the oft-mentioned claim that such "colloborative learning" activities save the teacher time: I find that it takes an enormous amount of time to set up, structure, and monitor such activities in order to ensure their effectiveness. Instead I would claim that peer evaluation helps students internalize the requirements of competent writing so that they do not lose their skills shortly after they leave the course.

## Notes

1. Elaine O. Lees, "Evaluating Student Writing," College Composition and Communicating, December, 1979, p. 370-373.

2. James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1968, p. 95 et passim.

3. Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 85 et passim.

4. See, for example, Richard Gebhardt, "Process and Intention: A Bridge from Theory to Classroom," Writing Instructor, Summer '82, p. 135-146, and Len Fox "What to Do When Grammar Exercises No Longer Help: Group Proofreading," College Composition and Communication, Oct. 1981, p. 332-3.

5. Dean Memering and Frank O'Hare, The Writer's Work, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980.

6. A packet of 17 checksheets to help teachers and peers evaluate writing is available upon request from the author.

7. Wendy Lapidus-Saltz, "The Effective Feedback Script: A Peer Response Procedure," The Writing Instructor, Fall 1981, p. 19-25.

8. Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," College English, Sept. 1979, p. 19-37.

9. Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

10. Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," College Composition and Communication, December, 1980, p. 380 et passim.

11. Walter Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," PMLA, January, 1975, p. 9-21.

12. Linda Flower, Problem Solving Strategies for Writers, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981, p. 154.

13. Irvin Peckham, "Peer Evaluation," English Journal, Oct. 1978, p. 61-63.